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Book Chronicles Life in Cambodia's Killing Fields From a Local's View

By Jennifer Wake



Jil Plummer Photo provided

Most little girls spend their childhoods dancing in princess dresses or planning tea parties, but Chanbopha Oum, now known as Brenda Oum, co-owner of Papillon Gourmet Coffees in Lafayette, spent her childhood fighting for her life.

When she was 5-years-old, Oum and her family were forced from their home in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, by the Khmer Rouge army, consisting of teenage peasant guerillas led by Pol Pot beginning in 1975. With a goal to form a communist peasant society, all forms of capitalism, Western civilization, city life, religion and all foreign influences were extinguished by the Pol Pot regime, cities were evacuated, and citizens were forced into slave labor, resulting in approximately 1.5 million deaths due to execution, malnutrition, overwork and disease over the next three years.

Oum's mother, two brothers and her sister joined millions on the four-day death march from Phnom

Penh, where they traveled on foot at gunpoint to what has become known as the "killing fields." Oum's family was subjected to a life of hard labor until they escaped to Thailand before coming to America on Feb. 28, 1987.

When local author Jil Plummer heard Oum's childhood story, she approached her about writing a book about it. "Remember to Remember," was released in February, with over 100 people attending the Feb. 14 book launch at Papillon. While filled with tragedy, the book is a tale of hope, underscoring the resilience and determination of one little girl and her will to persevere.

The book follows Oum through her childhood as she finds inventive ways to survive the labor camps in Cambodia, then as she and her family cross the Thai border to the refugee camp Khoo-I-Dang where she meets Liu Chea, now known as Tom, the other co-owner who greets Papillon customers from behind the counter with his wife, Brenda, by his side.

"The book is really a love story," said Plummer. "It's wonderful having Tom in the background supporting her. People always forget about him, so sweet and quiet."

Chea helped Oum and her family enter the Thai refugee camp illegally, and hid them under a floor while securing their identification tags for the camp. He shared his rations of food with the family and directed them to ensure their safety while they hid. He eventually followed the family to the United States, where he asked Oum to marry him.

To capture the stark prison camp conditions and to describe the Cambodian countryside, which Plummer says is similar to Thailand, the author used detailed diary entries written by her uncle when he was interred in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. She also pulled from her own childhood memories when writing the book, which she calls a fictionalized true story.

While researching the book, Plummer learned many things, such as what currency was used at the time, the different dialects spoken and the types of shoes people wore. She even learned how to grow rice. But she was drawn to research about the brutality of these types of regimes and how people can learn to be so cruel.

"Education is so important, especially the liberal arts, to see a broader view," she said. "I always thought Pol Pot and Bin Ladin were so well-educated, but they were bitten by a bug that got into their heads."

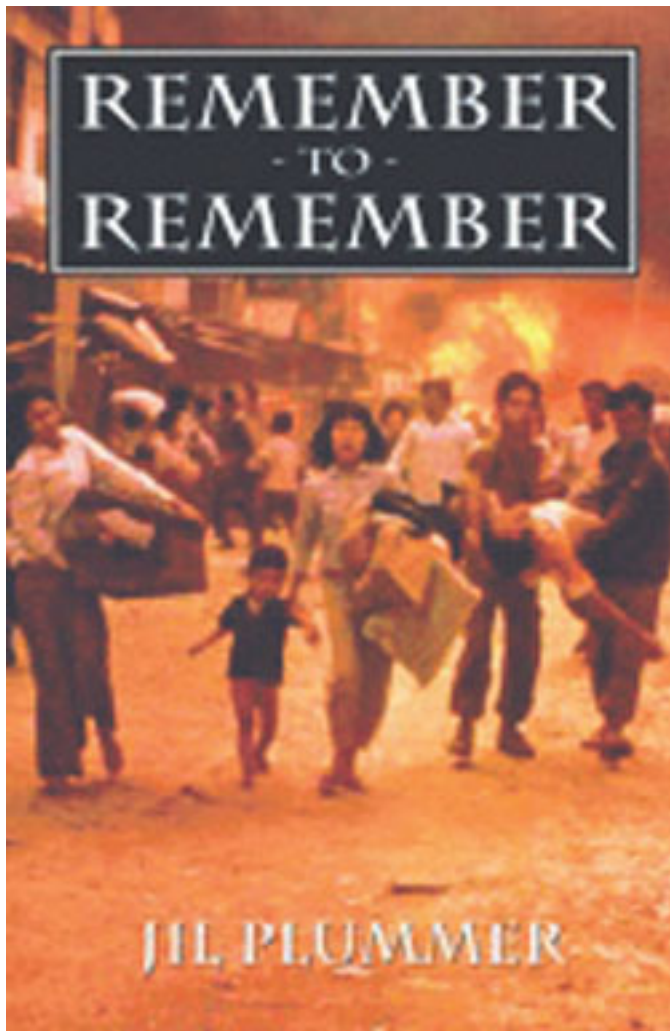
The events of the book are accurate, but small, descriptive pieces were added that Plummer felt might have happened under those circumstances - a water buffalo sighting at the side of a pond; a butterfly floating by in the rice fields.

"Children have short attention spans. I wanted to add what a child would do," said Plummer. "There is so much tragedy in the book, so I added certain parts to lighten it up." The final product is a narrative that flows beautifully, with fully-formed characters that leave you rooting for their success.

"When I started the book I was amazed by the whole story," Plummer said. "It made me realize how petty our problems often are."

She and Oum have recently been invited to speak about the book at local book clubs and Plummer plans to attend an author event at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center this summer.

"Remember to Remember" is available on Amazon.com or you can pick up a copy at Papillon in La Fiesta Square, where you will likely find Oum and Chea smiling behind the counter, and Plummer at a table, coffee in hand, chatting with friends.



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